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**Should the DoD continue to have a
Base Realignment and Closure Process?**

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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March 31, 2109

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Abstract

Base Realignment and Closing Commission (BRAC) is the congressionally authorized process DoD has previously used to reorganize its base structure to more efficiently and effectively support our forces, increase operational readiness and facilitate new ways of doing business. The government used this mechanism to make difficult decisions regarding which domestic military bases should be closed or realigned. The DoD estimates that a future BRAC round could generate approximately \$7 billion in annual recurring savings in today's dollars. Resources currently being spent on excess installation infrastructure could be allocated to higher priority requirements, such as efforts to modernize weapons, enhance quality of life, and improve readiness. Yet, the politics of military base closures are particularly difficult in a political system like that of the United States, where "all politics is local;" where congressional committees with jurisdiction over military bases tend to over-represent districts containing bases; and where gridlock and inaction are institutionally privileged. Given the potential dislocation that can result from a base closure, the conventional wisdom holds that base closures end congressional careers, and few legislators are willing to sacrifice themselves. The 2005 BRAC Commission recommended having a BRAC round every eight to 10 years, and being that the BRAC process is a sound system, it should be utilized each decade in order to further streamline and realign the DoD's vast, redundant infrastructure and resources as we continue to evolve into a more joint force.

The Base Realignment and Closing Commission (BRAC) came into being in 1988 in the United States. BRAC is the congressionally authorized process DoD has previously used to reorganize its base structure to more efficiently and effectively support our forces, increase operational readiness and facilitate new ways of doing business. The government used this mechanism to make difficult decisions regarding which domestic military bases should be closed or realigned. The DoD estimates that a future BRAC round, based on the costs and savings experiences of BRACs 93/95 and a reduction in installation infrastructure of approximately 20 percent, could generate approximately \$7 billion in annual recurring savings in today's dollars. Resources currently being spent on excess installation infrastructure could be allocated to higher priority requirements, such as efforts to modernize weapons, enhance quality of life, and improve readiness.¹ The Department's physical plant is huge by any standard, consisting of more than 539,000 individual buildings and structures, at more than 5,570 locations, on more than 29 million acres.² The 2005 BRAC Commission recommended having a BRAC round every eight to 10 years, and this author believes, regardless of the contentious political issues further discussed, that the BRAC process is a sound system which should be utilized each decade in order to further streamline and realign the DoD's vast, redundant infrastructure and resources as we continue to evolve into a more joint force.

While the base closure topic comes up as an example of parochialism within elected institutions, not much has been written about either the history of the process or the political realities affecting such decisions. Particularly in the wake of the most recent period of military contractions in the waning years of the Cold War and in the post-Cold War period, domestic military base closures have remained contentious and difficult decisions for elected

representatives. They are ones that officials would rather not take credit for, and for which they might well try to avoid being blamed.³

Several broad characteristics of military base closures can be identified. First, the "pain" from base closings tends to be highly concentrated geographically. In contrast to other contentious issues like gun control and pension reform where the effects are concentrated in an identifiable group, but one that is quite geographically dispersed, military bases can be viewed as huge funnels of material benefits that can be specified spatially. The concentric ring of benefits emanates from a dense core in the town or city closest to the base outward to the region, state or province. Consequently, for the most part loss imposition through closure of a base is highly visible and has a clear and delimited range of impacts. Benefits of such closures, however, are as widely dispersed as those that accrue from gun control or pension cutbacks. Base closure pain allocation isn't a typical problem; the problem is politics in general. There is a concentrated, very small minority who stands to suffer greatly versus a much diffused majority who stands to gain a little bit.

Moreover, unlike some cases of geographically concentrated losses such as the establishment of a storage area for high-level nuclear wastes, where imposition of costs on one community is likely to lead to all other areas being spared, it is hard to generalize about the precedent-setting effects of military base closures. There are some generalizations however, that can be made in regard to the urban versus rural area recovery from closures; more often, urban centers that lose bases tend to recover much more quickly and successfully than rural areas. Closing some bases may lead to other bases being spared or even expanded, but have the opposite effect; proponents of economizing, emboldened by success in one round, may demand even more closings.

In contrast to symbolically driven issues such as gun control, the losses imposed by closing military bases are primarily material in nature and include jobs, both civilian and military, the withdrawal of the economic stimulus to a city and region, and extra tax revenue generated for state and provincial economies. Naturally, "ways of life" are sometimes invoked to resist a closure, but for the most part the arguments are starkly material. Of course, the level of opposition to a base closure also tends to reflect or mimic the size of the facility and the impact that such a closure will have on the wider community. Again, in the United States, the closure of a large facility like the Charleston, SC naval shipyard, which was one of the first enterprises undertaken in that city after it had been colonized in the 17th Century, will have a much more intense and concentrated effect on the immediate and surrounding areas than a smaller facility. Over the years the Charleston shipyard has acquired a number of ancillary bases and installations that support the facility. Therefore, the closure of major or minor military installations in the region would have highly visible impacts on rural areas already suffering from weak economies and bleak economic prospects.

All of these considerations would lead one to expect that base closings are very difficult for governments to impose and relatively easy for potential losers, over time, to find the most effective means to resist. In institutional terms, there is an additional reason for this difficulty and this advantage. Since bases are located in a specific area, their loss can be clearly identified with a political representative. Because Congressional systems organize political representation among spatial lines, any type of loss imposition that has a clearly spatial delineation will be politically sensitive. Reinforcing this is the problem of regional rivalries. Virtually every country is divided along regional lines in some fashion, and politics everywhere involves treating different regions with some measure of fairness. This dynamic requires no elaboration in the

U.S. cases, because bases are distributed across all regions, and any closure always runs the risk of being framed as an attack on a particular region.⁴

The politics of military base closures should be particularly difficult in a political system like that of the United States, where as former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill stated "all politics is local;" where congressional committees with jurisdiction over military bases tend to over-represent districts containing bases; and where gridlock and inaction are institutionally privileged.⁵ Given the potential dislocation that can result from a base closure, the conventional wisdom holds that base closures end congressional careers, and few legislators are willing to sacrifice themselves. Legislators could attempt to distance themselves from political blame by delegating authority for closures to the executive branch, and for quite some time in this century the executive branch made base closure decisions in some capacity. But legislators share a not entirely unreasonable notion that DoD closure initiatives are likely to be either heavily biased in favor of the president's party or targeted at those members who do not support the president's defense policies. Since the end of World War II, domestic base closures have always tread a line between parochial and partisan politics on the one hand and national security needs on the other. That balancing act has changed a bit over time; mostly the shift involved the way the various political players behaved and how they wanted their actions to be perceived.⁶

This shift in responses is a direct result of the change in the BRAC legislation and the way the decision-making procedures were to operate, since the DoD now had to draw up a list of bases for closure and realignment and then present that to the BRAC Commission for analysis. This returned the procedure, in many respects, to the way base closures had been done in the past when the secretary of defense would begin by submitting a list of bases to Congress. But the difference here, both from the 1988 BRAC and from the way it had been done previously, was

that the base closure and realignment decision-making process was protected and insulated from partisan or parochial politics to a large extent. The 1991 BRAC Report to the President mentioned this particular characteristic of the commission, and how it had helped this Commission do a better job, as well as for the 2005 BRAC round.⁷

The 1991 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission's recommendations emerged from a uniquely open process, in which testimony and viewpoints were heard from community and congressional leaders. This process insulated the Commission from partisan politics. The end result, that some bases would be closed, had been determined by the passage of the legislation to reconstitute the BRAC. This protected and more or less guaranteed base closures. The structure of the BRAC and the way it operates were crafted so as to protect the Commission itself from accusations of partisanship or other kinds of bias in its decisions.

Along with the reworking of the BRAC structure, there was a newly opened avenue to try to influence the Commission's decisions and evaluations. This is what prompted the outspoken and immediate responses from elected officials. They were hoping to focus the Commission's attention during its four-month period of scrutinizing and analyzing the Defense Secretary's recommendations. The task for members of Congress, and/or agitated members of a community, was to focus the Commission's attention on a particular installation and suggest that the DoD had somehow been remiss in its analysis of that particular installation and inappropriately had included it on the list for closure or realignment. The BRAC Commission was fully within its authority to "add, delete, or modify the Secretary's list." The job of the Commission was specifically to "ensure that the proposals submitted by DoD did not deviate substantially from the force-structure plan and the eight congressionally approved selection criteria."⁸ The newly open procedure, along with this mandate to make sure that the DoD had been true to the

evaluation criteria for selecting bases, meant that elected officials changed their behavior with regard to the base closure decision-making process. This reorientation brought about a shift in initial responses to the secretary's list of bases as well as towards the Commission itself.

The new open process prompted politicians to take some kind of action. Elected officials worried that if they did not publicly take action their constituents would blame them if bases were closed in their districts and states. Faced with public hearings, public announcements of the bases to be closed, and an established procedure, politicians could not reasonably be expected to refrain from trying to influence the base closure process. And try they did.

During the 1970s and 1980s, those who had lobbied members to keep their bases open had been grass roots organizations, generally without much sophistication. What had to be done in those days consisted mostly of bringing the issue to the attention of the appropriate congressional delegation. After that, the affected members would do the rest of the lobbying, urging their colleagues to vote with them, and so on. This was not to be the case with the newly implemented BRAC process. Those who hoped to keep their base open would have to find some means of convincing the Commission that the DoD had made a miscalculation by putting the base on its list in the first place. This would take more sophistication and creativity, and possibly more professional lobbying methods.

Thus, the three BRAC rounds that came out of the 1990 legislation opened up opportunities for professional consultants to make public presentations, offer new arguments for keeping bases open, manipulate the system and otherwise influence outcomes. As an example of lobbying that was done and the avenues pursued to influence the process, the city of Charleston, S.C. spent about \$1 million to make its case to the BRAC Commission, hiring consultants, putting together facts, figures and reports, and presenting extensive information to the BRAC

Commission when it came to town. In the end, Charleston lost. Although the BRAC commissioners acknowledged that the presentation had made them re-consider the case, they stuck to their original conclusion. Members of Congress and various communities hired former staff members from the BRAC Commission to advise them during the subsequent rounds. Today the Charleston community is reaping the rewards of losing the case as “the Charleston shipyard has turned into a beehive of commercial and residential activities;” a success story nonetheless.⁹ Members of Congress also pursued the usual routes to get what they wanted by holding up appointments to the Commission and trying to frustrate the appropriations process. The White House joined in, selecting more overtly political and partisan appointees for the Commission and offering up less controversial lists of bases to be closed. In addition, fewer bases were selected for closure in the run up to the 1995 election year, and there was an attempt to avoid base closures in states exerting political weight during the presidential election season.

Every effort was made to slow or reverse the process, lessen the pain, and particularly to influence those making the decisions. With each round of closures, the commission felt the pressures from various actors. Bases were still chosen for closure, but the final round had selected fewer of them, and the openings for those who had hoped to change outcomes had become more discernable. There was also an attempt to pit the institutions of government against one another in order to hold up the decision-making process.

From this brief overview, it is clear that base closures have been dogged by the parochial and constituent concerns of elected representatives. Politicians would not be doing their jobs if they did not express concern about the potential impacts on their districts, ridings, states or territories of such closures. But the challenge of military base closures coupled with attempts to fulfill national security demands have generated some creative politics of loss imposition

yielding greater success than might have been presupposed. The United States had difficulty closing bases during the 1970s and 1980s. Political sensitivity to the imposition of "pain" on voters conflicted with a growing need to cut expensive surplus military infrastructure.

Considerations of the social and economic impact of closures kept most representatives from taking any initiatives to assist the defense establishments with implementing them. In the United States, institutional characteristics and constraints impeded closures for expected reasons.

However, future economic forecasts necessitate the ongoing look at 'Big Government' cost and resource reductions. The BRAC process is one of the DoD's greatest tools in contributing to these necessary reductions. There is still redundant DoD infrastructure on the books, and with the ongoing migration to joint basing and the consolidation of smaller military units to larger facilities, the BRAC process must be continually looked at each decade in order for the DoD to bear its part in streamlining and economizing its business.

Endnotes

¹ BRAC FAQs

² BSR2009Baseline.pdf

³ Barnhouse, DoD Responds To Public Comments on BRAC Criteria

⁴ Walsh, *Area gets DOD grant*

⁵ Coyle, *Will There Ever Be Another BRAC?*

⁶ Garmone, *BRAC 2005: DoD Briefs Commissioners On Strategy Concerns*

⁷ Vantran, *DoD Asks Commanders For Data As 2005 BRAC Process Begins*

⁸ “Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission Report to the President,: July 1991, v-vi

⁹ Korb, BRAC Failed Capacity Financial Goals

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